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SUBJECT: CONGRESS OF WRITERS AND ARTISTS DEBATES CHANGES IN
THE SYSTEM

Classified By: COM Michael E. Parmly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1.(C) Summary: In a closed-door meeting of writers and artists last month, Cuban intellectuals criticized the government for, among other things, neglecting education, poor TV and radio programming, stifling red tape, and restricting access to the Internet. The VII Congress of the National Union of Writers and Artists from Cuba (UNEAC) expressed hope that the changes that have come about since Raul Castro became president are signs of more good things to come. We view these groups as an important voice of internal dissent within the regime. End Summary.

12. (SBU) The seventh congress of the Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba (UNEAC) met April 1-4 in Havana with 415 delegates in attendance. The meeting kicked off amidst high expectations due to the fact that: it was the first meeting of this organization representing Cuba's top intellectuals in ten years; it was the first time that Fidel would not be presiding over its sessions; and it came in the wake of a number of policy changes announced by Cuba's new president, Raul Castro.

Background

13. (SBU) UNEAC, which describes itself as a non-governmental social, cultural, and professional organization was not immune to criticism. It began as a small elite organization when it was created in 1961, but has grown to 8,500 members, of which some 1,500 are less than 40 years old. Two criticisms that emerged out of the seventh congress were that it was too big and that it should have more young people in its ranks. (Note: There is an organization that groups writers and artists of less than 35 years of age called the Asociacion Hermanos Saiz which is under the Communist Youth Organization.)

14. (SBU) UNEAC is one of the key sub units of the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) and this congress was one of the last two hurdles to be cleared before a full party congress, now scheduled for the second half of 2009, can be held. (The other is the congress of women, which has not been scheduled yet.)

Traditional shell on the outside....

15. (SBU) Raul and Politburo leaders Carlos Lage, Esteban Lazo, and Culture Minister Abel Prieto spoke at the opening and closing sessions. These sessions were covered by the Cuban newspapers and carried on Cuban television news programs. The Cuban press also published summaries of the discussions held during the working sessions of UNEAC's thirteen committees. Some quotes sounded like traditional Fidel-style revolutionary harangues. For instance:

--From leading writer and poet Miguel Barnet, who had been in

charge of organizing the congress, and (as predicted) went on to be elected president of UNEAC: "Our number one commitment should be to strengthen the inalienable commitment to the principles of our socialist, Martianist (referring to Cuban national hero Jose Marti) and Fidelist revolution."
--From Abel Prieto: "We need to wage a battle against the colonial models that contaminate us now."

¶6. (SBU) This type of rhetoric was to be expected. According to the official press accounts, the purpose of the congress was to revitalize UNEAC and reinforce its role in protecting and promoting culture. The theme of the previous congress a decade ago was "imperialistic cultural domination." On that occasion, Fidel famously said, "Within the Revolution, everything; outside of it, nothing." Not surprisingly, a letter from Fidel to this new congress ended with: "Everything that strengthens the Revolution is good; everything that weakens it is bad."

....but juicier tidbits inside.

¶7. (SBU) What was unprecedented in the conduct of this congress, however, was the openness with which this privileged sector criticized the government and the "sacred cows" of the Revolution, and the fact that these criticisms were replayed by the Cuban media several times a day during this four-day event. The congress gave a formal voice to the criticisms levied at the government during the debates encouraged by Raul in his July 26 2007 speech.

¶8. (SBU) Intellectual Graziella Pogolotti criticized the education system for not teaching children to think, and, in what must be understood as a criticism of the GOC policy to send teachers to Venezuela in exchange for oil, asked that experienced teachers be sent back to the classrooms. Similarly, writer Reynaldo Gonzalez blamed poorly trained young teachers for the loss of traditional values and the prevalence of vulgarity. Intellectual Alfredo Guevara said: "One can never build a society on the basis of dogma, stubbornness, or the denial of the Cuban reality."

¶9. (SBU) Barnet and internationally recognized Havana City historian Eusebio Leal acknowledged that racism is still a problem in Cuba and suggested that sanctions are needed to address it. Many others complained about the dilapidated condition of city buildings, poor infrastructure, the erosion of traditional values, and low copyright royalties, among other problems.

¶10. (SBU) Participants debated at length the low quality of television programming. News leaked out that the Vice President of the Cuban Institute of Radio and Television had announced that Cuba would soon launch a 24-hour channel with programs from around the world. (Note: At this point, most Cuban television comes from the U.S., Europe, and other Latin American countries, with the U.S. programming dominating. Most recently these have included "The Sopranos.")

¶11. (C) In order to get an insider's view of the UNEAC congress, COM Parmlly, Pol/Econ counselor and the APAO talked to Helmo Hernandez, an intellectual who is also chairman of the Ludwig Foundation, which promotes the work of Cuban plastic artists. Hernandez, who likes to keep a low profile though he believes that artists should always push the limits, told us that he had been asked to be involved in the organization of the congress and presided over the key culture and society committee. As such, he gave perhaps the most high-profile speech, which he said had been cleared at least by Politburo member Esteban Lazo. Hernandez's speech can be read as a collective mea culpa of the intellectuals who have tended to look outside for explanations of what is wrong with Cuba's socialist system. It had veiled criticism of Cuban government censorship of information and misguided cultural policies. At one point in his speech he said: "We should not be afraid to elucidate the truth, however risky

and difficult that may seem." In another, he referred to "the new communication technologies," saying: " Prohibiting access to those technologies would not just be an empty gesture, but would increase its attractiveness...Moreover, the rejection of the wealth of information that current technologies make available to us, would be like stepping back in time and would place us outside of reality."

¶12. (C) Comment: One could interpret the abundance of criticism that took place within the congress as a sort of Cuban Glasnost, where artists and intellectuals who have remained on the island at long last found their voices and began to use a language of their own. These groups have always been more prone to actual debate, but inviting an Helmo Hernandez to speak as he did, and then allowing his words to stand, is a big step beyond the usual practice. In the end, even if it failed to live up to the high expectations and hopes of some of its most optimistic participants and observers, the seventh UNEAC congress managed to confirm and reinforce trends that have been developing in Cuban society for some time. We believe the artists and intellectuals represent the most likely source of "formal" dissent that exists on the island, and that the UNEAC congress may embolden others to push towards achievement of the expectations that many had for the seventh congress.
PARMLY